

**DEVELOPING COHESION IN ESSAY WRITING AT THE SECONDARY SCHOOL
LEVEL**

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Abstract

Developing cohesion in essay writing is essential for secondary school students to express ideas clearly and logically. Cohesion refers to the linguistic elements that bind sentences and ideas within a text, facilitating comprehension and unity. Despite its importance, many secondary learners struggle with deploying cohesive devices effectively, often leading to disconnected and confusing texts. This article examines existing research on cohesive devices used by learners, identifies common patterns and challenges, and discusses instructional implications for improving cohesion in secondary-level essay writing.

Key words

cohesion, essay writing, secondary school, cohesive devices, ESL/EFL, writing instruction

Introduction

Writing at the secondary school level involves more than correct grammar and vocabulary; it requires learners to connect ideas effectively and produce essays that are logically structured and comprehensible. As Asroriyah & Sugeng (2018) mentioned, cohesion plays a central role in this process, as it provides the “linguistic glue” that links sentences and paragraphs, guiding readers through the writer’s argument or narrative. For many learners, especially those studying English as a second or foreign language, achieving cohesion poses challenges due to limited awareness of cohesive devices and writing strategies. This article explores how cohesion can be developed in secondary-level essay writing, drawing on research findings and pedagogical perspectives. A mixed-methods approach involving analysis of student texts and classroom-based observations highlights that reference and conjunction devices are used most frequently, while substitution and ellipsis are underutilized. The discussion emphasizes the value of explicit instruction in cohesive devices, structured writing activities, and teacher feedback to support secondary learners in producing more cohesive essays.

Literature Review

Cohesion refers to the linguistic means by which texts are made semantically connected and understandable (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). Commonly studied cohesive devices include reference, conjunctions, lexical ties, substitution, and ellipsis. Research shows that learners tend to vary in their use of these devices depending on proficiency and instructional exposure.

Empirical Findings on Secondary School Learners

Studies examining written discourse of secondary school learners have repeatedly found that reference markers (e.g., pronouns) and conjunctions dominate students’ use of cohesive devices, while others like ellipsis appear rarely. For example, a discourse analysis of senior high school students’ explanation texts found that reference and conjunction devices comprised the majority of grammatical cohesion used, while ellipsis occurred at much lower rates.

Additionally, research on tenth-grade students’ writing across urban and rural schools revealed that students did employ a range of cohesive devices, but patterns and frequencies varied (Maulana, 2025).

These findings align with studies in tertiary and EFL contexts showing that learners at different levels rely heavily on familiar cohesive ties while underusing or misusing less familiar ones, which can reduce clarity and text unity.

Methods

This article synthesizes findings from published research on essay writing and cohesive devices with classroom-based observations of secondary school learners. Selected studies were reviewed for their analysis of how learners employed cohesive devices in written text. Additionally, writing samples from secondary school classes were reviewed qualitatively to identify patterns of device use, common errors, and instructional implications. The mixed approach allows both theoretical insights and practical observations to inform the discussion.

Results & Discussion

According to Kashiha (2022), consistent with previous research, secondary school students show a high frequency of reference and conjunction use in their essays. These devices help link ideas and signals transitions but may be applied mechanically without deeper semantic understanding.

Conversely, ellipsis and substitution—which can eliminate redundancy and create more fluid text—appear less frequently, suggesting that learners either lack awareness of these devices or find them difficult to apply effectively.

Lexical cohesion through repetition, synonyms, and collocations also varies across learners. Effective lexical ties contribute to text unity and help maintain topic continuity, yet many students rely on simple repetition rather than semantic variation.

There are some common challenges in Secondary-Level Writing. Firstly, many learners tend to be over reliant on simple linkers, which may lead to monotonous or mechanical text. Another issue could be inappropriate or ambiguous references, where pronouns lack clear antecedents. Also, limited use of advanced cohesive forms can be witnessed, resulting in repetitive and unvaried writing.

These patterns reflect broader challenges in secondary writing instruction, where focus often remains on grammar and vocabulary rather than discourse-level skills.

Implications for Teaching

To address these challenges, instructors should take some actions into consideration.

First of all, they should explicitly teach a range of cohesive devices—not just basic reference and conjunctions but also substitution, ellipsis, and lexical cohesion. Also, it is better to use model texts and analytical exercises where learners identify and discuss how devices contribute to text unity. Instructors should incorporate structured writing activities, such as sentence combining and paragraph sequencing, to encourage thoughtful use of ties. The last but not the least, they are advised to provide focused feedback on sentence and paragraph cohesion during drafting and revising.

Conclusion

Developing cohesion in essay writing at the secondary school level is integral to helping learners produce clear, organized, and reader-friendly texts. Research shows that while learners frequently use certain cohesive devices, gaps remain in their ability to apply a full range of cohesive strategies effectively. Explicit instruction, practice with diverse texts, and constructive feedback can support learners in mastering cohesion. By fostering cohesive writing skills, educators can enhance students' overall academic communication competence.

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